

## in news

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### **State rejects flood plan for Bootheel**

*By Bill Lambrecht  
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WASHINGTON - Citing threats to wetlands and forests, the state of Missouri on Monday rejected an Army Corps of Engineers flood control plan in the Bootheel that has been sought by locals since the 1950s.

The Department of Natural Resources declared in a letter to the corps that it was turning down certification for the \$85 million St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project because of disputes between federal agencies about potential environmental harm.

The state resources agency also stressed concerns about damage to Big Oak Tree State Park, a fragile swath of original Missouri landscape near East Prairie.

"Because of this disagreement, we can not ensure that water quality and wetlands are protected," wrote Scott Totten, director of water protection and soil conservation in the natural resources department.

Missouri officials faxed the denial letter to the corps on Monday evening, barely meeting a deadline under a provision of the federal Clean Water Act giving the state authority to grant or deny certification for large federal projects.

The state has been fending off heavy pressures in recent days, particularly from elected officials who support the flood control project.

The resources agency said the denial was "without prejudice" and invited the corps to resubmit the application. The letter suggested that independent experts be asked to review persistent disagreements between the corps and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the project's environmental effects.

The rejected plan called for closing an earthen levee's 1,500-foot gap that has been used as a release valve to protect more populated areas from Mississippi River flooding.

Federal agencies have argued in Washington for years about the design of the project, which is to protect flood-prone areas around East Prairie. But despite improvements that resulted in increasing the price tag by more than \$20 million, the federal Fish and Wildlife agency and the National Park Service continued to highlight prospects of environmental harm.

About 18,000 acres of wetlands would be altered or damaged under the plan, but the corps said it would compensate for roughly half of that affected acreage by buying low-lying farmlands and planting hardwood trees on the land.

In its denial letter, Missouri officials quoted from a Fish and Wildlife Service memo last month calling the replacement plan "completely infeasible." Government biologists also had expressed worry about harm to fish and wildlife.

The state pointed to additional Park Service concerns about the long-term effects on Big Oak Tree State Park. A Park Service official wrote recently that "although the ecological impact may not be obvious right after the project is completed, over a long period of time, it may

destroy the forest."

Totten said Monday night that the state had obtained an agreement from corps officials on Friday to pay closer attention to those concerns. The state park would be among the issues discussed in a conference call with the corps today about what happens next, he said.

Corps officials were not immediately available for comment. But they insisted last week that they have gone to great lengths to minimize damage of the project, and noted that the Environmental Protection Agency dropped its objections.

Lynn Bock, attorney for the St. John Levee and Drainage District, said he was "flabbergasted" by the state's decision.

"My father worked on this thing," he said, noting long-standing efforts to remedy flooding. "It's frustrating that DNR has chosen to side with the New York penthouse lawyers rather than the people of the city of Pin Hook."

Bock was referring to environmental groups in New York and Washington, who count the Bootheel project near the top of their list of the corps' most destructive projects in the country.

Ted Heisel, spokesman for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, said he was pleased at the decision but not surprised given the state's duties under the law.

"Missouri has already lost 90 percent of its wetlands. This would have been the last nail in the coffin for that final piece down there," he said.

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